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ABSTRACT

According to this paper, the biggest hazard of a private language (or professional jargon) may not be that it obscures efforts to communicate with those outside the business, but rather that it successfully communicates ideas never intended. The paper explores one bit of "educationese"--"safe space" or "safe place"--and reflects on what language may be saying about educators and about their conceptions of work. Using a framework of personal narrative and analysis, the paper speaks to the issue of how language creates and disrupts communities. The paper continues with an analysis of four examples of talk about "safe space" drawn from curriculum theory and teacher research--these examples reveal that safe space is an emerging metaphor for classroom life, according to which: (1) each person is isolated, (2) this isolation is both physical and psychic, (3) each person can become less isolated by expressing his/her diverse individuality, and (4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed. The final section of the paper looks at the implications of the metaphor of "safe space" and finds that although the metaphor offers a hopeful response to pervasive concerns about individual isolation in an increasingly stressful world it also unintentionally provides ammunition for those who charge that schools are intellectual wastelands which must be returned to the primary mission of transmitting facts. Contains eight references. (NKA)

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"Unsafe Spaces": Reflections on a Specimen of Educational Jargon

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The theme of this year's AERA meeting, "talking together in educational research and practice," leads obviously to questions about how professional educators can spread their influence through "circles of communication." It also leads, perhaps less obviously, to questions about what it is we are saying and how we are saying it. The biggest hazard of a private language (or professional jargon) may not be that it obscures our efforts to communicate with those outside the business, but rather that it successfully communicates ideas we have never intended. The aim of this paper is to explore one bit of educationese--"safe space" or "safe place"--and to reflect on what that language may be saying about educators and about their conceptions of their work.

The framework of this paper is a combination of personal narrative and analysis. The story begins at the 1996 annual meeting of AERA, where I first became aware of talk about the classroom as a "safe space." This personal history is part of the paper's argument because it speaks to the issue of how language creates and disrupts communities. The paper continues with an analysis of four examples of talk about "safe space" drawn from curriculum theory and teacher research. These reveal that "safe space" is an emerging metaphor for classroom life, according to which (1) we are all isolated, (2) our isolation is both physical and psychic, (3) we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality, and (4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed. The final section of the paper looks at the implications of the metaphor of "safe space." The metaphor offers a hopeful response to pervasive (if vague) concerns

about individual isolation in an increasingly stressful world, but it also unintentionally provides ammunition for those who charge that schools are intellectual wastelands and that they must be returned to the primary mission of transmitting facts.

A Specimen of Jargon

During the last two days of AERA's 1996 annual meeting, I attended four sessions that, although apparently unrelated, proved to be connected in a profound way. One of the sessions concerned reflection in teaching, another discussed professional development sites, a third looked at moral perspectives on educational practice, and the last was an address by Maxine Greene. No speaker appeared in more than one of the sessions, and the presentations were dissimilar in atmosphere, structure, theme, and the size of the audience. Yet in all four, the phrase "safe space" (or sometimes, "safe place") and the admonishment to create a safe space in classrooms were repeatedly spoken. At no time did anyone explain what a safe space is, nor did anyone, panelist or audience, express any doubt that creating a safe space was indeed a desirable thing to do.

The apparent acceptance of this way of speaking puzzled and disturbed me. A tradition of educational thought running from Plato through Rousseau to Dewey emphasizes that learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things. In some ways the "safe space" talk would seem (in its openness and its emphasis on the student) to belong to this tradition. Yet, why the emphasis on safety? Being interrogated by

Socrates would evoke many feelings, but would a feeling of safety be among them?

Recall the interactions Socrates orchestrates with Meno and the slave boy in Plato's *Meno*. Finding his attempts to define *virtue* undone by the questions and objections that Socrates interposes, Meno finally exclaims that the project is hopeless: not only will they never be able to define *virtue*, but learning itself seems impossible. In fact, says Meno, he has lost the knowledge he once possessed. Because of the way that Socrates has been "bewitching and beguiling" him, Meno finds himself "quite perplexed." He laments:

> I have made many speeches about virtue before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is. (Plato, 1976, 80b)

In an effort to continue the conversation, Socrates offers to demonstrate that learning is possible, and he begins to teach one of Meno's attendants a lesson in geometry. Sure enough, it isn't long before the boy is as confused about the geometry problem as Meno was about virtue. Socrates argues, however, that this outcome is a good thing. The boy's ignorant confidence has been replaced by awareness of ignorance: "now, as he does not know, he would be glad to find out" (84b). Whether or not we agree with this assessment, it seems clear that once Socrates begins to ask questions, there is no safe place to hide.

At the time of the 1996 AERA annual meeting, my thinking about the "safe

space" talk was not nearly so coherent as the previous paragraphs suggest. I had no argument or conceptual framework that opposed the idea of the classroom as a "safe space." In fact, the first few times I heard the words, they did not even register as an identifiable entity. They were simply part of the stream of speech. It wasn't until the third of the four presentations, when I heard the phrase yet again, that I wrote a note to myself that said simply, "safe space." I was curious to find out if other people in education were talking this way.

Later, as I began to search for the phrase, I discovered that neither *Resources in Education*, nor *Education Index*, nor the *AREA Annual Meeting Program* use "safe space" as an index entry. Nor could I find any other book index that uses the term. But the ERIC computer listing does have some entries. For the years from 1982-1992, 4 items can be retrieved with the phrase "safe space" and 13 items with the phrase "safe place." For the years 1992-1996, 3 items appear under "safe space" and 12 items under "safe place." In other words, the usage is modest but increasing. Nearly as many items appeared in the last four years as appeared in the ten years before that. With my awareness heightened, I also began to discover "safe space" talk in the discussions and papers of my students and in the pronouncements of some local school administrators.

The entries in ERIC reveal that while "safe space" and "safe place" are used to describe extraordinarily diverse situations, the two terms are used in the same ways and are simply different versions of the same idea. The "space" or "place" can be literal or metaphoric. Some articles talk about a "safe house," others about

a safe conversation. The safety can be from physical or psychic harm. Some articles talk about the removal of asbestos or protecting children from abuse, others about the feelings of immigrants or the acceptance of minorities. And the safety may be needed to prevent harm to the self or to prevent harm to others in the environment. Some articles talk about safe swimming, other about practicing bullying prevention or the heightening of counselor awareness.

Using these categories, I could classify the instances of "safe space" talk that I had heard at AERA. The people I had heard were talking about a primarily metaphoric space constructed through social relations, not from plasterboard, two-by-fours, and metal detectors. They were concerned (for the most part) with psychic benefits, not physical harms. And they seemed to be concerned about the injuries that individuals suffer at the hands of society. Now this classification clarifies the usage somewhat, but it does not account for the term's explanatory appeal. Why do some (prominent) educators believe that ordinary children in ordinary classrooms have a great need for this sort of "safe space"? In the case of an abused child or a child with Tourette's syndrome, the need for (and nature of) safety is obvious. The need for safety from drug-related shootings or gangs of rapists is also obvious. When a speaker such as William Bennett calls for schools to provide a safe environment, I may disagree with his analysis, but I know that he is saying that children should not be physically harmed while at school. The school should be a safe place. But what lies behind the concern for a metaphorical, psychically safe space? It could be, of course, with such a protean term as "safe

space," that the instances of usage are merely coincidental. I believe, however, that they express an emerging metaphor for classroom life and that the metaphor responds to a common experience of isolation in a stressful world.

Safe from What?

To explore the way that "safe space" is talked about, I want to look at four examples--two descriptions of teaching practice and two more theoretical approaches. Together they reveal a surprisingly consistent vision of "safe space."

The first example appeared about ten years ago. Fourth-grade teacher Christine Hawkins tells the story of Caleb, a boy who "was afraid of everything." Caleb spent his days cowering along the walls of the classroom, muttering to himself, nearly unable to interact with anyone. Hawkins had no idea what to do for him until one day she "happened to tune into Caleb's muttering" while he "was putting a pencil inside his pencil case. He was telling the pencil how lucky it was to have a safe place" (Hawkins, 1997, 58). Inspired, Hawkins brought a refrigerator box to school and enclosed Caleb's desk. With a door and window cut in the box, Caleb relaxed inside. Over the next few days he "began to bring in little things to make his office more homey." Eventually he was able to shed the box and to talk and play with his classmates.

While Caleb's transformation was occurring, "an unexpected thing" was happening to the rest of the children in the class:

> The other students began to fashion their own personal workspaces. Their desks sprouted old calendars,

> paperweights, pencil holders, pictures, and signs that identified the owner of each "office." With their spaces defined, they began to produce more and better work, and I realized that they too each needed a space to feel safe and comfortable. (58)

In this article, four elements of "safe space" talk are clearly described: (1) an isolated child comes to stand for all children, (2) the physical space of the classroom comes to stand for social connectedness, (3) the "safe space" is characterized as "comfortable," and (4) students in "safe spaces" are said to do better work. These are the elements of "safe space" we will find in other examples.

In a more recent article, Judy Pollak talks about a ninth grader named Stacy who had been killed with her mother in a tragic fire. A newspaper article about the incident describes Stacy as "quiet and shy," but Pollak argues that "her isolation was probably much more severe. One of her junior high teachers reported that she was very frightened of entering high school" (Pollak, 1995, 185). Reflecting on Stacy, Pollak vows,

> My philosophy of teaching is forever altered. I will try to be more vigilant in the future to recognize other "Stacy's" and to help them find a comfortable place in my classroom. (186)

Moreover, Pollak feels that all middle school children need "different

educational experiences" that will "encourage success, community, and belonging." She says,

> At least for one hour a day, I will provide a sense of security and belonging to everyone in my room, including me. Even if students leave my class without a clear understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*, I will celebrate the fact that they remember my class as a place they liked to be. (186)

In Pollak's article, we see again the themes of "safé space" as we saw them in the article by Hawkins. An isolated child becomes a metaphor for all children, the physical locale of the classroom becomes a metaphor for a way of acknowledging and relating to others, and the "safe space" is identified as a "comfortable" place, a place that people want to be. Only the fourth element seems altered. Pollak raises the possibility that the "safe space" classroom may not be as intellectually rigorous as some other classroom. At least, children in a safe space may not, Pollak suggests, attend to the traditional curriculum as they might elsewhere.

My third example of "safe space" talk is an essay by Donna H. Kerr, "Democracy, Nurturance, and Community." In this essay Kerr looks at the problem of the loss of self, or the loss of soul. Only through "civic culture," she argues, can the soul find "the sanity of authentic reflections. Only in that space can one find comfort" (Kerr, 1996, 47). We must have, she continues,

> Social spaces, civic spaces, a safe, shared place to play

> with life as one actually experiences it; a place where others recognize, acknowledge, respect one's experiences--the self requires these and is constituted in them. (47)

For an example, Kerr turns to Vivian Paley's story about Jason, "a boy who isolated himself and tended to act with hostility [and] talked of himself as a helicopter" (49). Paley listened to Jason, "trusted" him with his helicopter, allowed his need "to run its course," and "provided the social space needed for him to become curious about others and to figure out a way to connect with them" (58).

Jason's story is not, says Kerr, a unique tale about a "needful other." In fact, to see him as a case that requires fixing is to adopt the "pedagogy of the poor . . . in which there is no space for the self to grow" (59). Instead, she urges us to recognize that even the "advantaged . . . can and do suffer from flattened or undernourished selves." Even "children of privilege" can be "caught in the ghetto of fantasies of particular adults' lives" (60). All of us risk the "domination" of "traditionally based institutions" (56-57). Each of us needs "safe harbors for meeting and confronting [our] demons" (54). In short, Kerr explicitly argues the first element of the metaphor of "safe space": Jason's tale of isolation is Everychild's story.

The second element of "safe space," the merging of physical and metaphorical space also appears in Kerr's argument. She contrasts traditionally based institutions, "places that one cannot easily choose to leave" (56) and the

"civic community" of Vivian Paley's classroom. Such a space has "built-in protection: one can walk away, if needed" (58). Is the "leaving" and "walking away" literal or figurative or both? The answer is unclear, and this ambiguity echoes the way that Hawkins and Pollak speak of classroom "space."

Kerr's stand on the third element of the metaphor of "safe space" is more difficult to untangle. Although she says that only in civic community can the soul find "comfort," she also acknowledges that the road to comfort is fraught with stress. Even the act of writing her essay exposes her:

> I will say some things of a personal nature, and I will feel exposed, vulnerable. These would be utterly silly things to do if my purposes were purely academic. (37)

Why do it? Because, she says, there is a more painful condition than vulnerability, and that is to be invisible or unacknowledged. She imagines the horror of being invisible in all mirrors. She is thinking about

> not optical mirrors, but social mirrors. That is, when you feel pain, no one will acknowledge your discomfort. When you feel ebullient, no one will smile back. When you grieve, no one will acknowledge your loss. (41)

This condition is, of course, merely a hypothetical, though Kerr suggests that institutions such as school may have a similar effect: they may tend to kill the self by refusing to recognize it. So, if being vulnerable is not comfortable, vulnerability may yet be, Kerr is saying, more comfortable than being invisible.

On the fourth element of "safe space," the question of the relationship between safety and school performance, Kerr is less explicit. She does not argue, for instance, that Jason is a better student because Vivian Paley provides him with "social space." But she does urge all of us to create "little civic societies" as Vivian Paley did. And as what is at issue is the loss of self, we can see why she ends with the ringing exhortation, "No other stakes could be so high" (66).

My fourth example of "safe space" talk comes from Maxine Greene's book, *Releasing the Imagination*. The book is filled with talk about making spaces, moving through spaces, expanding spaces, living in spaces. Greene makes the metaphor central to her thinking:

> The idea of making spaces for ourselves, experiencing ourselves in our connectedness and taking initiatives to move through those spaces, seems to me to be of the first importance. (1995, 134).

Why is it of the "first importance"? The answer is, I think, that for Greene, to "make a space" is to be free. We can see this connection when we recall that her use of the "space" metaphor draws on the work of Denis Donoghue who says that the arts are "really momentous, because they provide for spaces in which we can live in total freedom" (quoted, 134). Donoghue compares our lives to a page in a book. We can live in the workaday world of the text, or we can make a space in the margin. Our ability to live a free life depends on our ability to move out of the text and into the margin.

From the very beginning, then, Greene is concerned with what might be called the fundamental isolation--the isolation of our lives from our selves. Forced into a humdrum conventionality, we are unable to grow, to participate fully in the community, or to find our voice (132). Throughout the book Greene hears voices crying out for recognition, acknowledgement, visibility--

> not only the voices of women and members of minority groups and gay people and disabled people, but those of children, patients in hospitals and hospices, addicts, and wanderers, those in search of shelter or cure or a bit of happiness, a bit of joy. (186)

Who does not find himself finally in that list? Who is not in search of a bit of joy? For Greene, all of us are isolated. We all need to find our voice and find ourselves. The first element of "safe space" talk is demonstrated by Greene's expansion of the notion of isolation to embrace the human condition.

The second element of "safe space" talk is also expanded in Greene's writing. She talks about places in schools:

> Clattering corridors are like the backstreeets of ancient cities, filled with folks speaking multiple languages, holding their bodies distinctively, watching for allies and for friends. (10)

And she talks about the places she would like schools to become:

> We ought to reach out to established ateliers, studios,

> and other places where music can be composed and rehearsed, where poems and stories can be read, where drawings and paintings and sculptures can be made. (150)

But these vividly imagined, sharply defined places often melt away as Greene seeks to explain the significance of the spaces. Art education and aesthetic education must be joined, she says, "so that we can enable our students to live within the arts, making clearings and spaces for themselves" (135). Are these "clearings and spaces" to be found in corners of an atelier or a studio? Or is she talking now about a metaphorical space, a space in the mind or the heart? When she says that imagination "is what enables us to cross those empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called 'other' over the years" (3), the classroom has become a metaphor for social connectedness. As was true in each of the other examples of "safe space" talk, the metaphorical and the physical silently merge. In Greene's book, just as we saw in Hawkins's story about Caleb, the boy who needed a refrigerator box around his desk, a physical "safe space" stands for the freedom to express our diverse individuality.

The third element of "safe space" talk is, in Greene's book, as it was in Kerr's essay, a more complicated issue. She would, I suspect, flatly reject any suggestion that the spaces she is talking about are "comfortable." After all, she is talking about confronting images that are "alienating or shocking" (150). She does not invite us to seek contentment, but rather insists,

> We must, instead, seek more shocks of awareness as the time goes on, more explorations, more adventures into meaning, more active and uneasy participation in the human community's unending quest. (151)

But the aim of this uneasy quest is, if not comfort, something much like that. Greene seeks a "humane and liberating pedagogy" (52), one which will promote "the education of persons to become different, to find their voices, and to play participatory and articulate parts in a community in the making" (132). She seeks "some sense-making that brings us together in community" (3). Reaching this goal requires, as Kerr argued, negotiating the minefield of exposure and vulnerability; and further requires, says Greene, confronting the alienating and the shocking. But when people do show their differences and do use their own voices and do play a part in their communities, is this not the "safe space" that Hawkins and Pollak and Kerr are talking about? Greene does not use the word "safe," but her vision of "human freedom" is an elaboration of what other people mean when they talk about "safe spaces."

To ask, finally, if Greene feels that "safe spaces" make better students is clearly anticlimactic. Her point is to change what we mean by "student." How could the finding of self in a community of selves not be desired? She might well echo Kerr: "No other stakes could be so high."

Now, what do these four examples of "safe space" talk reveal? The most remarkable revelation is probably the uniformity of perspective. Although each of

the four has a different problem, a different mode of expression, a different place in the educational community, they nevertheless all tell the same story: (1) we are all isolated, (2) our isolation is both physical and psychic, (3) we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality, and (4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed. This is not an argument to be refuted, but a metaphor about classroom life. Just as we might talk about the school as factory or about teaching as agriculture, we can talk about the classroom as a "safe space."

The four examples of "safe space" talk also reveal the appeal of this metaphor. It is a response to the menace of an alienating world. The sources of isolation are an all-too-familiar litany--

> the drugs that intervene so horrendously in young lives,
> the AIDS epidemic, the homelessness, the deterioration
> of families and neighborhoods, the teenage pregnancies,
> the hectic rhythms, the malaise. (Greene, 1995, 187)

What could be more natural than the impulse, on seeing children in such a world, to take them out of those spaces and to put them into a "safe space"? It is the instinctive impulse of the mother who comforts a crying child.[1]

In adopting the "safe space" metaphor, the educator calls us "to resist the

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[1] Is it coincidence that almost all of the instances of "safe space" talk that I have encountered have come from women? Or, to put the question another way, does my male gender prevent me from understanding what "safe space" talk is about?

thoughtlessness, banality, technical rationality, carelessness, and 'savage inequalities' that now undermine public education at every turn" (Greene, 1995, 2). Who does not wish join this resistance? The question is, where does the "safe space" metaphor lead us? What happens to classroom life when the metaphor is adopted by teachers? And what happens to public perceptions of teaching when educators speak of the need that all children have for a "safe space"?

Unintended Outcomes

When the "safe space" metaphor moves into common currency, it boils down to a fairly simple ideal. In a paper a student of mine wrote, she put the case this way:

> The concept of care . . . states that there must be absence of threat in the classroom in order for any type of learning to take place. Absence of threat and care go hand in hand. Absence of threat encompasses not only physical safety but also safety from intimidation and stress. (Kinnaird, 1996)

In this brief statement, Kinnaird shows us where the "safe space" metaphor leads: a "safe space" is a place without stress. In a "safe space" classroom, students are not isolated, alienated, threatened, intimidated, or "stressed-out." Teachers who create "safe spaces" care about their students, and because they care, they eliminate the pain from education.

Kinnaird's use of the word *stress* is especially illuminating. According to

Richard Schweder, the English word *stress* has become a major American export, finding its way into "most of the major languages of the world." Responding to our "cosmic uneasiness," it describes "someone who actively copes with the strains and pressures of modern cosmopolitan living."

But Schweder argues that the deep reason the word has become the *mot de jour* is that it is "exquisitely vague and elusive." It is a "no-fault verbal gambit" that implies a vague discomfort without blaming anyone or anything in particular.

> When someone says, "I am stressed out," it isn't clear whether the source of suffering is inside or outside, subjective or objective, mental or physical. (Schweder, 1997).

In short, the person suffering stress is in an unsafe space--isolated physically and metaphorically, yearning for comfort, struggling to cope. When students live in such a world, what is a teacher to do? The answer is obvious: create a "safe space." Put a metaphorical refrigerator box around each student, and tell them all that it's okay for them to express themselves.

This is not, of course, what Kerr and Greene are saying. They challenge us to embrace, not to avoid, "shocks of awareness" and the dangers of vulnerabilty. But their message loses its edge when isolation is taken as a universal condition. Their elaborately crafted metaphor is boiled down until it says simply, Keep the stress out of classroom life.

Understood as the avoidance of stress, the "safe space" metaphor drains

from classroom life every impulse toward critical reflection. It's one thing to say that students should not be laughed at for posing a question or for offering a wrong answer. It's another to say that students must never be conscious of their ignorance. It's one thing to say that students should not be belittled for a personal preference or harrassed because of an unpopular opinion. It's another to say that students must never be asked why their preferences and opinions are different from those of others. It's one thing to say that students should be capable of self-revelation. It's another to say that they must always like what they see revealed.

The power of the "safe space" metaphor to censor critical thinking was revealed to me in a teacher education course I observed (Benson and Boostrom, 1995). The professor of this class in multicultural education created a "safe space" by insisting that each student's contributions must be respected, and this attitude quickly became a standard of classroom life. On one of the many occasions when groups of students worked together to summarize and portray their thoughts visually on poster paper, Steven insulted the poster prepared by Jennifer's group, calling it a "comic strip." Later, during the class discussion about the posters, Jennifer complained that it wasn't right for people to make fun of her drawing of what she called "the big-headed man." Judging by the students' support of her complaint, both the professor and I later agreed that the class as a whole supported Jennifer's claim that Russell had spoken unfairly. In other words, the injunction to respect one another's contributions had come to be understood as a general prohibition against critically assessing someone else's work or even

expressing the belief that some people's achievements might be better (more meaningful, more beautiful, more lasting, more pervasive, wiser, etc.) than other people's achievements. All discrimination (all choosing, all ranking, all evaluating) had come to be seen as equally evil whether done on an individual basis ("Group 1's poster isn't as well thought out as Group 2's") or on a group basis ("Soccer players never create insightful posters").

Many, perhaps most, of the educators who talk about creating "safe spaces" would vehemently deny that they would ever countenance bland acceptance of all opinions. But the problem is that that precise outcome is built into the metaphor of "safe space." The stories that underlie the metaphor are not stories about intellectual challenge and personal growth. They are stories about the expression of diverse individuality. Recall Caleb, the boy who was afraid of everything. Yes, it's true that we see *him* transformed from pathological shyness to participation in the life of the class. But the point of the story is not that Caleb began to say to others what he had previously said only to his pencil. The point is that all the other students (who were not pathologically shy) began to feel free to express their diverse individuality. We are not told that they were challenged to grow, only that they were free to speak up, to decorate their space, to show themselves. This is what "safe spaces" are for. "The challenge," says Maxine Greene,

> is to make the ground palpable and visible to our students, to make possible the interplay of multiple voices, of "not quite commensurable visions." It is to

attend to the plurality of consciousnesses . . . (198)

When everyone's voice is accepted, no one's voice can be criticized. The tendency of "safe space" talk to censor critical reflection turns sympathy into sentimentality, open-mindedness into empty-headedness. That we need to hear other voices in order to grow is certainly true, but we also need to be able respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them, to sharpen our own perspectives through the friction of dialogue. A person can learn, says Socrates, "if he is brave and does not tire of the search" (Plato, 81d). We have to be brave because along the way we are going to be "vulnerable and exposed"; we are going to encounter images that are "alientating and shocking." We are going to be very unsafe.

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